



Region 2 Office
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DECISION NOTICE:

Milltown State Park Forest Health Improvement and Trail Development

DESCRIPTION OF PROPOSED PROJECT

Montana State Parks (MSP), a division of Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks (FWP), proposes to conduct a forest management project to improve forest health conditions in the upland area surrounding the Milltown State Park Overlook. This project would include thinning trees 6-inches in diameter and smaller and removal of all beetle-infested trees, to benefit large ponderosa pine trees, larch and aspen. Approximately 20 acres would be treated inside the developed recreation site. Additionally, MSP proposes to construct an interpretive trail on the south side of the restored Clark Fork River floodplain, which would connect to the Overlook area and a trail leading west from the Overlook to the Bandmann Flats area (for a total of approximately 2.5 miles of new trail). This construction would include interpretive/educational information highlighting natural and cultural history, ecology, and restoration. Trail development would include additional work such as installation of an informational kiosk, interpretive signage, and a vault latrine at the Overlook.

Alternative A: No Action

Montana State Parks would not implement the proposed forest health and trail improvement projects. As a result, stands of trees would remain densely overstocked and forest health benefits would not be realized. Beetle infestations could continue and legacy trees would continue to be stressed by overstocked stands and increasing susceptibility to beetle attack. Dead trees would continue to deteriorate and fall, posing safety hazards to power lines, recreationists, adjacent landowners, and site improvements, as well as adding to hazardous fuels. Establishment of trails and other park improvements such as kiosks, interpretive signage and a vault latrine at the Overlook area would not take place. Milltown State Park would provide fewer established trail offerings, struggle to meet public demand for trail opportunities, and be increasingly challenged to accommodate public recreation in concert with protecting the newly restored natural environment from impacts associated with recreational use. Educational potential afforded by the floodplain interpretive trail would also go unrealized.

Alternative B (Preferred): Implementation of Forest Health Improvement and Trail Development

Implementing the proposed forest health and recreational improvements would have positive ecological and social benefits. Forest health and aesthetics, visitor satisfaction and safety as well as wildlife habitat would all be improved. With removal of the beetle-infested trees, various hazards associated with deadfall and fire would be reduced, and thinning would reduce

competition between trees while allowing increased vigor and resistance to pests. Establishing trails would provide enhanced public access to the park, while maintaining protection of the restored natural environment. Interpretive components of trail establishment would provide both formal and informal educational benefits.

PUBLIC PROCESS AND COMMENT

A draft Environmental Assessment (EA) for the proposed project was made available for public review and comment from October 24, 2014 through 5:00 pm November 28, 2014. Legal notices for the Proposed Milltown State Park Forest Health Improvement and Trail Development were published twice each in the *Missoulian*, and *Helena Independent Record*. The EA was posted on the Montana State Parks website and a statewide press release issued.

MSP received four comments on the proposed project. The following represents comments received and a MSP response where applicable:

1. One comment expressed support for the preferred alternative:
 - “Alternative B sounds like a great improvement to the park. I'm looking forward to exploring the area.”
2. One comment suggested that greater priority be placed on public access to the park site:
 - “Your priority needs to be on providing public access to this site. Spending more money on a site that is not open to the public is not responsible. You need to shift your priorities. It should be a major embarrassment that this site is not open to the public after all these years and all of the money that has been spent.”

MSP Response: Trail development will be conducted in anticipation of the reopening of the Clark Fork River floodplain, tentatively set for July 2015. Trails will be accessible from the Milltown State Park Overlook, which is currently open to the public. Efforts are well-underway to open other areas of the park, e.g. the Confluence Area, to the public. MSP is examining all alternatives and attempting to ensure permanent public access via an existing, privately-owned access road that leads to the Confluence Area, a situation that has been challenging due to the parcel's out-of-state ownership. MSP appreciates the public's patience with the process necessary to move forward a high-quality state park born from a Superfund site.

3. One comment shared concern about burning wood slash and stated a preference for chipping:
 - “Milltown State Park Forest Improvement project - you state that you will be burning or chipping wood slash from this project. I would like to see all these projects use chipping and not burning. The Western Montana valleys have been subjected to continual smoke from forest fires and prescribed burning for too long. We need to be more mindful of our lung health and quit burning everything. We are hurting our young and old citizens with this burn culture, the forests may be healthy, but we will not be healthy, we will all have respiratory diseases.”

MSP Response: The treatment of slash from the forest health improvement project will likely require both burning and chipping to appropriately and cost-effectively deal with accumulated slash. To the extent possible, MSP will utilize chipping in place of burning to avoid air quality impacts. Any burning that does occur will be done in accordance with all local, state and federal regulations with a priority placed on times when conditions are most favorable for minimizing air quality impacts.

4. An email from the Dept. of Natural Resources and Conservation offered minor edits and clarifications for the draft environmental assessment. The following is one example:
 - “Please add ‘USFS’ before ‘Western Bark Beetle...’ These are Forest Service funds that we administer.”

MSP Response: These suggestions have been integrated into the draft EA document. The changes do not change the scope of the proposed action or the analysis completed in the draft.

DECISION

Based on the analysis in the Draft Environmental Assessment and the applicable laws, regulations and policies, I have determined that the proposed action will not have significant effects on the human or physical environment. Therefore, an Environmental Impact Statement will not be prepared. It is my decision to implement Alternative B and to conduct the forest health improvement and trail development projects. By notification of this Decision Notice, the Draft EA is hereby made the Final EA. The Final EA and this Decision Notice are available from Montana State Parks at the above address.

This action is subject to appeal, which must be submitted to the FWP Parks Administrator in writing and postmarked within 30 days of this decision notice. The appeal must specifically describe the basis for the appeal, explain how the appellant has previously commented to the Department or participated in the decision making process, and how MSP might address the concerns of the appeal.



Chet Crowser
Regional Park Manager

12/9/14

Date